

# USAID's "Disinformation Primer:" Documents Reveal Censorship Promotion Across Sectors



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The authorities in the US are once again caught red-handed promoting censorship, this time via the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

USAID is normally used by the US government to spread its influence around the world, but now, according to documents from a case against the State Depa

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Engagement Center (GEC), the agency also actively participates in analyzing and spreading various censorship methods.

The lawsuit in question was filed by America First Legal (AFL), alleging that the State Department, via GEC, engages with private media to advance what the non-profit believes is government/private sector censorship and propaganda collusion.

Now, USAID's controversial activities have also been exposed thanks to the lawsuit, which revealed that one of the agency's bureaus, the Center on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) has come up with a "Disinformation Primer" – a 97-page document marked as being "for internal use only."

The Disinformation Primer – in fact, a censorship primer, to sum up the Foundation for Freedom Online watchdog's interpretation of the strategy – was "up and running" only one month after Joe Biden got sworn in, in February 2021.

## FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY

**What could technology companies do?**

- Create an international advisory council.
- Provide researchers with the data related to initiatives aimed at improving public discourse.
- Provide transparent criteria for any algorithmic changes that down-rank content.
- Work collaboratively.
- Highlight contextual details and build visual indicators.
- Eliminate financial incentives.
- Crack down on computational amplification.
- Adequately moderate non-English content.
- Pay attention to audio/visual forms of mis- and dis-information.
- Provide metadata to trusted partners.
- Build fact-checking and verification tools.
- Build "authenticity engines"
- Work on solutions specifically aimed at minimizing the impact of filter bubbles:
  - a. Let users customize feed and search algorithms.
  - b. Diversify exposure to different people and views.
  - c. Allow users to consume information privately.
  - d. Change the terminology used by the social networks.

**What could national governments do?**

- Commission research to map information disorder.
- Regulate ad networks.
- Require transparency around Facebook ads.
- Support public service media organizations and local news outlets.
- Roll out advanced cybersecurity training.
- Enforce minimum levels of public service news on to the platforms.

**What could media organizations do?**

- Collaborate.
- Agree policies on strategic silence.
- Ensure strong ethical standards across all media.
- Debunk sources as well as content.
- Produce more news literacy segments and features.
- Tell stories about the scale and threat posed by information disorder.
- Focus on improving the quality of headlines.
- Do not disseminate fabricated content.

**What could civil society do?**

- Educate the public about the threat of information disorder.
- Act as honest brokers.

**What could education ministries do?**

- Work internationally to create a standardized news literacy curriculum.
- Work with libraries.
- Update journalism school curricula.

**What could funding bodies do?**

- Provide support for testing solutions.
- Support technological solutions.
- Support programs teaching people critical research and information skills.

The extensive "primer" seeks to exert influence on how private tech, but also media companies can increase the level of existing censorship; the already existing

engagement with private entities is at the same time commended by USAID.

Other targets, more in line with USAID's overall activities, include foreign governments, specifically education departments, and funding sources. Inevitably, more "partners" are NGOs, non-profits, and think tanks, often themselves with ties to the government.

Some of the censorship techniques that USAID likes and recommends are Advertiser Outreach, which is designed to cut off media and accounts on social platforms from ad revenue, if their speech is what's known as "disfavored" (by those in power).

#### #10 ADVERTISER OUTREACH

In order to disrupt the funding and financial incentive to disinform, attention has also turned to the advertising industry, particularly with online advertising. A good example of this is the concerted response to the discovery of the websites traced to the village of Veles outside of Skopje, Macedonia, which showed how easy it was to exploit the digital advertising model to flood the news ecosystem with fabricated content. *Wired Magazine* profiled the Veles case study in 2017.<sup>199</sup>

As most online advertisers are unaware of the disinformation risk of the domains featuring their ads due to the automated process of ad placement, they inadvertently are funding and amplifying platforms that disinform.<sup>200</sup> Thus, cutting this financial support found in the ad-tech space would obstruct disinformation actors from spreading messaging online. Efforts have been made to inform advertisers of their risks, such as the threat to brand safety by being placed next to objectionable content, through conducting research and assessments of online media content. Additionally, with this data, organizations hope to aim to redirect funding to higher-quality news domains, improve regulatory and market environments, and support innovative and sustainable models for increasing revenues and reach.

A few examples of advertiser outreach are included in Annex 3: Emerging Solutions.

Another is propping up legacy media as these outlets steadily lose trust, with things like "prebunking" and the Redirect Method, developed by Google, which "relies on advertising using an online advertising platform such as Google AdWords, targeting tools and algorithms to combat online radicalization that comes from the spread and threat of dangerous, misleading information."

One striking quote from the document is that gaming sites and gamers should be prevented from forming "interpretations of the world that differ from 'mainstream' sources."

Worth noting is that this censorship, propaganda and indoctrination “handbook” – aimed at curtailing citizens’ freedom of expression and thought – was made using taxpayer money.

Original Article: <https://reclaimthenet.org/usaid-disinformation-primer>

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